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Leiden Declaration on Human Anatomy / Anatomical Collections

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THE LEIDEN DECLARATION ON HUMAN ANATOMY/ANATOMICAL COLLECTIONS

CONCERNING THE CONSERVATION & PRESERVATION OF ANATOMICAL & PATHOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS

THIS DECLARATION IS ADDRESSED TO THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR ANATOMICAL & PATHOLOGICAL MUSEUMS & COLLECTIONS WORLDWIDE

**From: Participants, delegates and supporters of the
International Conference on 'Cultures of Anatomical Collections',
held at Leiden University, 15-18 February 2012**
(<http://hum.leiden.edu/icd/news-events/cultures-of-anatomical-collections.html>)

We are scholars, curators and creative artists from across the world with professional involvements in human anatomy and pathology. We are writing to express our very great concern about the storage and preservation of collections of human anatomy and pathology in some parts of the world.

Almost every medical faculty possesses anatomical and/or pathological collections: human and animal preparations, wax- and other models, as well as drawings, photographs and documents and archives relating to them.

We salute and wholeheartedly commend and admire those institutions in which anatomical and pathological museum materials are celebrated and well-cared for.

However, we are also aware that in some other institutions, such collections are neglected: badly stored, poorly maintained, and rendered inaccessible to medical and other audiences.

Newer teaching methods and preoccupations have sometimes caused these collections to become under-appreciated. Financial constraints and crises can often mean that funding for the conservation, storage, and sometimes even the preservation, of anatomical collections can become de-prioritized. As a result, collections can be in great danger of becoming undervalued and neglected, which may eventually result in permanent damage.

We are aware of more than one recent instance in which curators have been marginalized or lost, and collections placed in inappropriate 'storage' conditions, rendering them liable to serious deterioration. Separated from their archives, these collections can lose identity, sometimes irrevocably.

We greatly fear that some uniquely important anatomical collections are currently in danger of being irretrievably damaged and perhaps lost to medical and cultural heritage.

We, the undersigned, wish to raise international awareness concerning the current critical situation for these collections.

Anatomical and pathological collections are medically relevant not only for future generations of medical students and faculty, and for future medical research. They are also important in the history of medicine generally, for the history of the institutions to which they belong, and also for a wider understanding of the cultural history of the body.

These collections sometimes document diseases and medical conditions that are now rare or simply no longer exist, teaching methods and preoccupations currently unfashionable or apparently superseded, and techniques of manufacture and display no longer practised. Collections often hold rare and extraordinary materials that are records of unique scientific investigations, medical conditions, and skills. In some cases these materials are

the only documents that allow us to understand key changes and developments in Western medicine, and their dissemination.

Moreover, anatomical collections are crucial to new scholarly inter-disciplinary studies that investigate the interaction between arts and sciences, especially but not exclusively medicine. Such collections allow the study of interactions between anatomists, scientists and anatomical artists, and other occupational groups involved in anatomical and pathological displays. They embody the rich histories related to the display of natural history and medical cabinets; they reveal how new artistic and documentary techniques and materials were adopted by physicians and scientists in other historical periods; they demonstrate how new knowledge about the body and the natural world was presented by and for the medical, scientific and sometimes lay audiences.

Ultimately anatomical collections are important in knowing ourselves and the bodies we are. In this sense they are no less important than world famous artworks like the “Mona Lisa”, the “Venus de Milo” or Michelangelo's “David”.

We urge medical faculties worldwide to mobilise all possible means in order to protect and preserve the important academic, medical, institutional, scientific and cultural heritage these collections represent.

Moreover we urge funding bodies to recognise and cherish these collections.

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Universeum - European Academic Heritage Network (www.universeum.it)

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